

# The Navy's Air War in Korea: September– October 1950

By Mark L. Evans

*Ensign Eldon W. Brown, Jr., of Fighter Squadron (VF) 53 had a feeling that this run was going to be the toughest of the lot. Diving through North Korean flak to strafe a row of wooden crates, his guns suddenly set off a tremendous explosion. Barely keeping his plane in the air through the resulting shock wave, Brown climbed quickly, but still could not outrun the ensuing cloud which passed him at 4,000 feet. Miles away in Inchon harbor, the transport Mount McKinley (AGC 7) rocked at her moorings and the crew radioed strike leader Commander Joseph M. Murphy, "What the hell happened?" Murphy casually responded, "We just exploded some ammunition." The Battle of Inchon had begun.*

When the North Korean invasion ran out of steam near the Naktong River around Pusan during August and September 1950 (see "Korea's Early Days: Carrier Air Power's Proving Ground," Jul–Aug 00), the situation presented General Douglas MacArthur a golden opportunity. MacArthur quickly assessed that the North Korean People's Army's (NKPA) weakness in strategic mobility comprised its Achilles' heel, and he decided that a landing against its exposed flank would threaten the enemy's overextended forces at the most vulnerable point, and regain the initiative for the beleaguered United Nations (UN) forces.

On 10 August 1950 the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved Inchon as the target, and six days later the







This illustration by Herbert C. Hahn depicts the air-ground team in action as a Navy Vought F4U Corsair supports M-26 Pershing tanks during heavy fighting in Korea.



X Corps, Major General Edward M. Almond commanding, was activated to carry out the hazardous undertaking, designated Operation Chromite.

Rear Admiral James H. Doyle, Commander Amphibious Group 1, was assigned the crucial task of getting Almond's men ashore and keeping them there, while the perilous first wave was assigned to Maj. Gen. Oliver P. Smith's 1st Marine Division. Once the Marines secured the beachhead, the Army's 7th Bayonet Division, led by Maj. Gen. David G. Barr, would follow up. A successful landing at Inchon would make it possible to cut the enemy's primary supply lines through Seoul and secure the nearby airfields at Kimpo and Suwon.

As if the NKPA didn't present enough of a challenge, the site was also plagued by a treacherous tidal range, one of the most extreme in Korea. Landing craft could cross the wide mud flats only at flood tide, and if enemy fire could not be suppressed it would be a blood bath. The narrow islands and channels of the approaches were also a navigational nightmare. To offset these problems and to prevent the North Koreans from strengthening their defenses, Kunsan, 105 miles south of Inchon, was chosen as a decoy to convince the North Koreans that the landings would occur there and not at Inchon.

In the days preceding the landings, UN air power pounded Kunsan. Strikes by both U.S. aircraft from *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) and British aircraft from the carrier *HMS Triumph* alternated with missions by USAF aircraft ranging from North American P-51 *Mustangs* to Boeing B-29 *Superfortresses*. Despite some alarming intelligence indications, including the revelation that a spy possessed copies of some of the plans, the deception worked and the North Koreans were taken completely by surprise.

Throughout Operation Chromite, the Navy maintained its carrier air groups (CVG) aboard large carriers (CV), while the Marines flew all of the fixed wing aircraft aboard the lighter carriers (CVE/CVL), with the exception of some Air Antisubmarine Squadron 22 TBM-3E/S *Avengers* aboard *Sicily* (CVE 118). Helicopter detachments aboard all carriers remained Navy manned at this time, though Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 was deployed ashore.

During the UN's air campaign in the Yellow Sea, *Badoeng Strait*, *Boxer* (CV 21) with CVG-2 embarked, *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) with CVG-11, *Valley Forge* (CV 45) with CVG-5, *Sicily* and *HMS Triumph* plastered North Korean positions with pinpoint precision. Alarms were a daily occurrence, but only once were the carriers themselves seriously threatened.



W. C. Rockwell

**Above, weary Marines rest after storming ashore at Inchon in September 1950. Opposite page, the Inchon invasion was crucial to UN operations south of the 38th parallel. The close-up map shows the strategic location of Wolmi-do in relation to Inchon.**

On 4 September *Valley Forge's* combat air patrol (CAP), comprising four F4U-4B *Corsairs* from VF-53, was stationed 20 miles from the carrier at 10,000 feet under the control of *Fletcher* (DDE 445). At 1329 radar detected "bogeys" closing from 60 miles away, not showing identification friend or foe. A minute later the CAP was ordered to intercept just as the raid split, with one part retiring north toward Kaiyo To Island, the other part closing on the task force at a ground speed of 180 knots at 12–13,000 feet.

At 1336 the *Corsairs* intercepted the raid 30 miles from the task force and discovered a bomber marked with Soviet red stars. Just as the CAP was requesting permission to fire if fired upon, the bomber's rear gunner fired on them, whereupon permission was given to open up. Division leader Lieutenant (jg) Richard Elwood Downs was out of position and missed on his first run, but his wingman, Ens. Edward Velora Laney, Jr., riddled the enemy aircraft with his guns, hitting the engine and exploding the fuel tank, as well as shooting off the tail section.

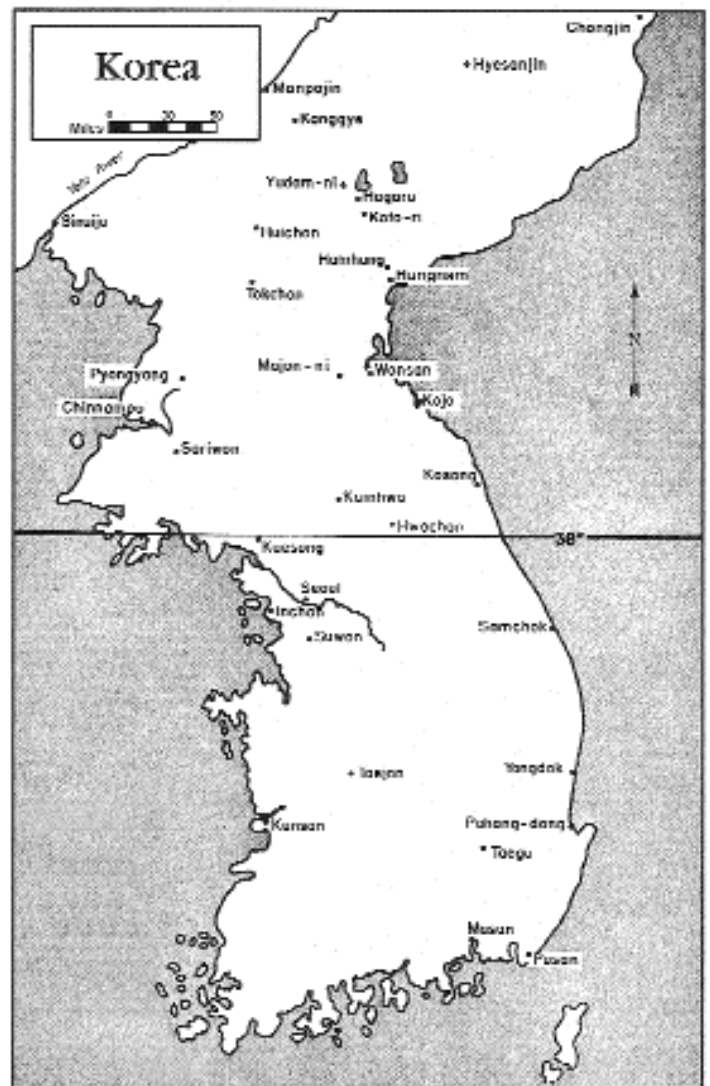
Later identified as an Ilyushin IL-10, the intruder spun into the sea in flames. There were no other contacts and the *Corsairs* recovered aboard by 1600. One of the bodies retrieved from the wreckage was Russian, and it was surmised that the aircraft had been delivered to a Manchurian field for North Korea. The bomber's actions during the confrontation substantiated claims concerning the depth of East Bloc involvement in the Korean War.

Although naval air-to-air encounters were rare, numerous sorties against ground targets were flown supporting the Inchon landings. F4U *Corsairs* and AD *Skyraiders* were especially feared by the North Koreans. Jet aircraft generally made daily sweeps over the enemy

airfields and flew CAP, allowing propeller aircraft to concentrate on their targets. Both types flew target combat air patrol (TARCAP), naval gun fire spotting, close support, deep support, call strikes, night heckler, night intruder and night TARCAP missions.

When one enemy battery opened up on the British light cruiser *HMS Kenya* at 1116 on 14 September, aircraft pounced on the guns quickly and obliterated the target. This prompted Captain Patrick W. Brock, RN, *Kenya's* skipper, to remark that "the enemy gunners were either very brave or very stupid."

The first phase of the Inchon invasion began on the morning of 15 September as ships and aircraft began bombarding the Wolmi-do peninsula. Its strategic location bordering Inchon harbor made seizing the peninsula crucial to the success of the invasion. The peninsula was blasted so intensely that following a pass over the island one *Valley Forge* pilot remarked that "the

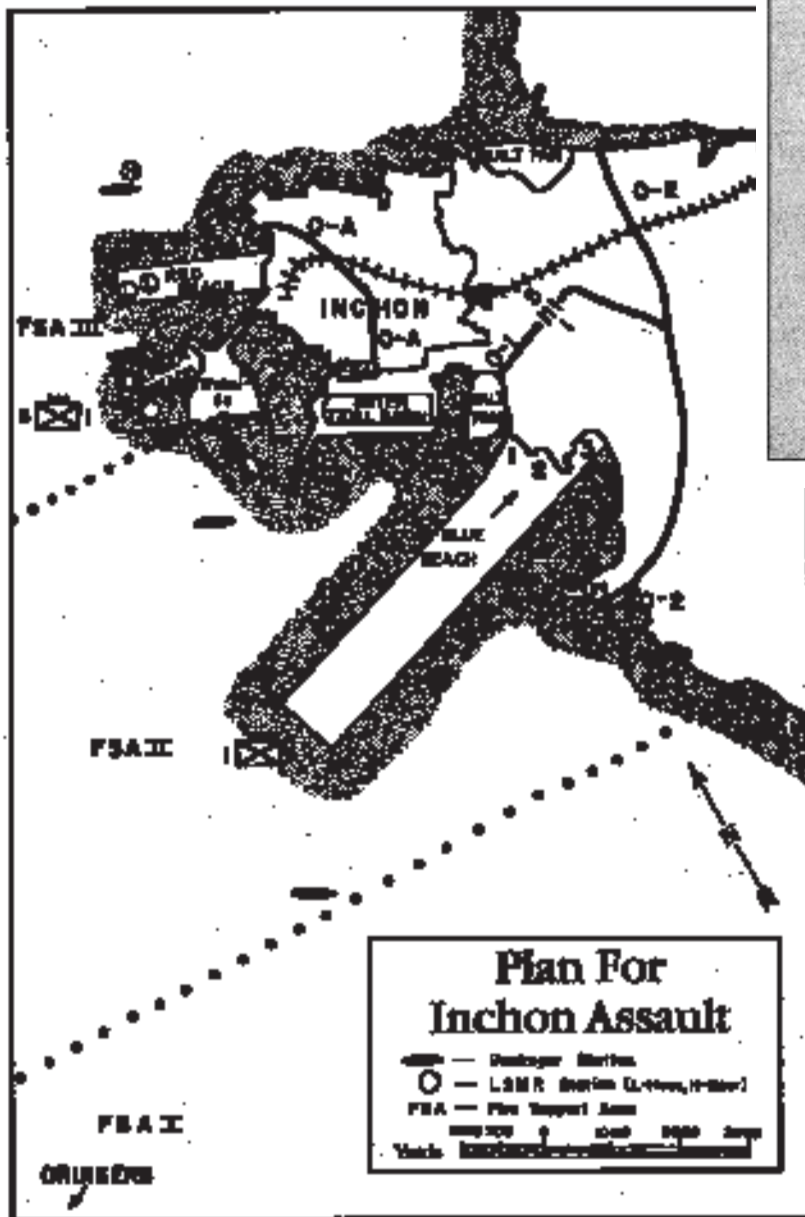


Maps courtesy W. Stephen Hill, USMC Historical Center

whole island looked like it had been shaved." When a relieved MacArthur learned that the outer harbor had been secured at the cost of only 17 wounded, he had RAdm. Doyle signal the task force commander: "The Navy and Marines have never shone more brightly than this morning." More was yet to come.

At 1432 *Boxer's* CVG-2—comprising VFs 23, 24, 63 and 64; Attack Squadron (VA) 65; and detachments from Composite Squadrons 3, 11, 33 and 61 and Helicopter Utility Squadron (HU) 1—began plastering Inchon. With *Skyriders* acting as target coordinators, a dozen *Corsairs* and five *Skyriders* attacked the Inchon beach with 500- and 1,000-pound general-purpose bombs, 5" high-velocity aircraft rockets (HVAR) and 3.5" target spotting rockets, and also conducted strafing runs.

The North Koreans never knew what hit them. Only two inaccurate bursts of flak





were put up against the attacking aircraft, remarkable given that following the landings, the Marines identified numerous anti-aircraft guns ranging from machine guns to heavier 122mm guns enlaced on the ground.

This strike was immediately followed by 2 more *Corsairs* flying as target coordinators for another 7 *Skyraiders* and 10 *Corsairs*, which pummeled buildings throughout the area, hitting factories and oil tanks and starting intense fires in the area. Again, only light flak was encountered. The only notable incident was when one of the pilots claimed that a jumpy U.S. destroyer fired on him as he returned over the fleet. Fortunately, he was not hit, and none of the ships reported shooting at any aircraft during these tense moments.

UN air power hit the North Koreans again and again, breaking enemy resistance and giving the Marine invasion force the lifesaving minutes they needed to get across the mud flats and secure their perimeters.

The lethal combination of air power and naval gunfire support proved crucial to Operation Chromite's success. Once ashore, the landing force discovered the frightening extent of the NKPA preparations. It became quite evident that if the operation had been postponed for even a single tide as originally envisioned, the landing forces would have faced a fortress. Fortunately, while the fighting for Wolmido was especially fierce, most of the experienced NKPA troops were deployed to the south, leaving only less experienced recruits in the area, many of whom were hastily conscripted local men sympathetic to the UN.

The next day, the strikes moved further inland to keep pace with the advancing troops on the ground. In the face of heavier and more accurate ground fire, four strikes delivered bombs, HVARs and napalm. Six CVG-2 *Skyraiders* on deep support hit a railroad yard adjacent to Yongduri and a railway at Suishokiri with HVARs, setting rolling stock and warehouses afire. The final strike consisted of 18 *Corsairs* and 8 *Skyraiders* flying offensive sorties, supported by 8 F4U-4s on defensive sorties. Concentrating on communications targets and infrastructure, they hit the railroad yard at Eitoho 5 to 10 miles southwest of Seoul, as well as targets around the capitol, including railroad yards, an oil storage depot and an ammunition dump. All of the strikes recovered by 1200.

During a counterattack early on 16 September, a column of six NKPA T-34/85 medium tanks rumbled toward the 5th Marines' positions, whose lighter weapons were useless against the monsters. Just as the tanks were practically on top of the Marines, *Corsairs* from the Marine Fighter Squadron 214 *Blacksheep* operating from *Sicily* swooped in and blasted the column apart. When the column lost its cohesion, the surviving NKPA tanks were then picked off by Marine M-26 Pershing tanks. During the attack, enemy fire shot down Capt. William F. Simpson, whose *Corsair* (BuNo 97479) struck the

ground and exploded.

Air opposition was limited to a strike by a pair of Yakovlev *Yak-3s* early on the morning of 17 September against the fire support ships. Coming in low, the *Yaks* straddled the ships with their bombing run. Four bombs erupted around the heavy cruiser *Rochester* (CA 124), one of which hit her on the aviation crane, followed by a strafing run on British light cruiser HMS *Jamaica* that killed one of her crewmen, though the British gunners evened the score by splashing one

**Below, Douglas AD-4 *Skyraiders* from VA-55 flying from *Valley Forge* (CV 45) fire 5" rockets at dug-in North Korean troops on 24 October 1950. Opposite, a CVG-11 *Corsair* from *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) protects the crowded *Inchon* anchorage in September 1950.**



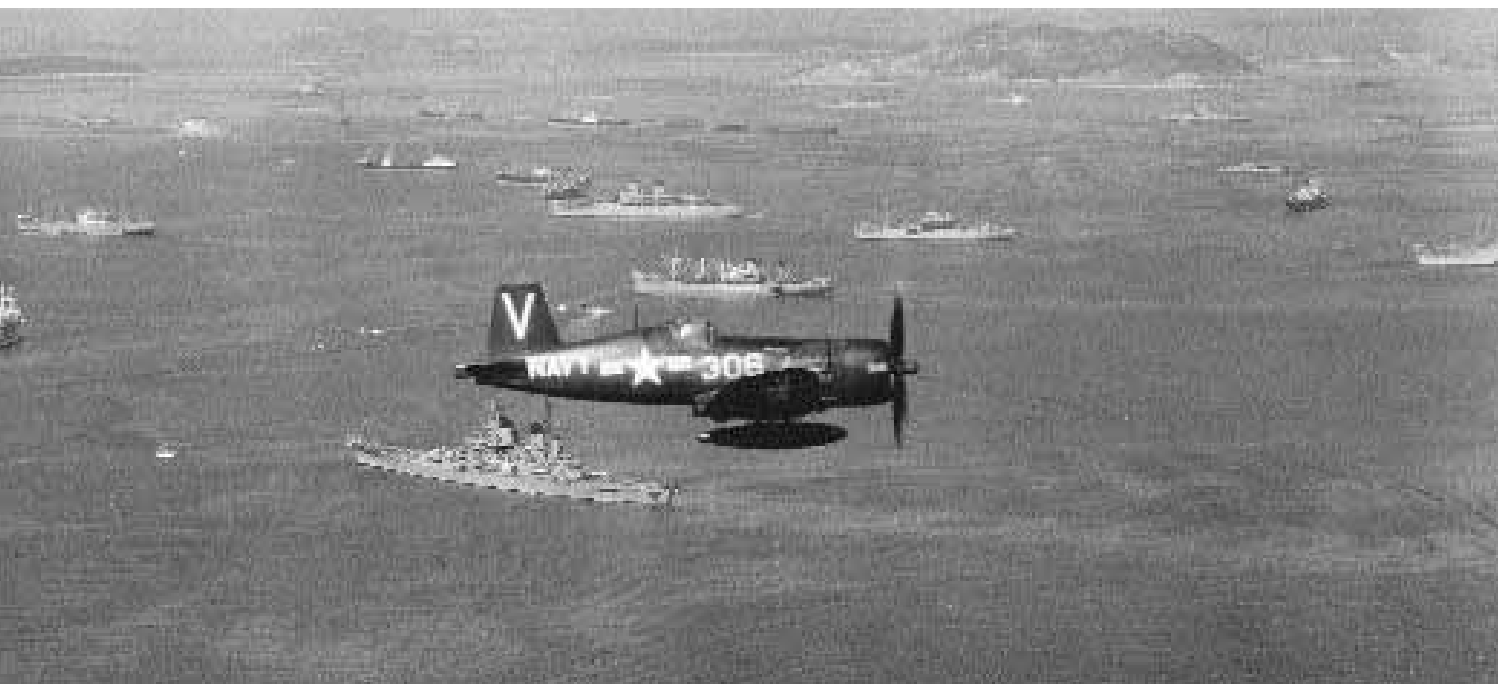
of the bogeys.

That morning, MacArthur went ashore to inspect the progress, and against the advice of his staff ordered his driver to take him up to an exposed ridge to observe the fighting, positioning his jeep above a culvert. Shortly after his departure, the Marines caught seven heavily armed North Koreans lurking inside the culvert, giving the general a close call.

Shortly after 0600 on this busy day Ens. R. R. Sanders of the VA-65 *Fist of the Fleet* was making a run against stubborn NKPA holdouts when his *Skyraider* was shot down by small arms fire. Sanders spent almost an hour on the ground trying to elude his pursuers before a VMO-6 helo could be brought in by Marines, risking heavy fire from the vengeful enemy. Following the rescue, *Corsairs* strafed the AD-4 to prevent the enemy from salvaging it.

As the UN forces neared Seoul, additional enemy reinforcements and stiffening resistance slowed the advance, forcing the struggling troops on the ground to call for repeated air strikes. In particular, the enemy had





stocked the area with ammunition supplies, which they expended lavishly.

Nevertheless, by the night of 17–18 September, the Marines fought their way through to Kimpo Airfield. Once the field was secured, Air Force and Navy aircraft operating from Kimpo lent firepower to the crescendo of death from above. North Korean prisoners especially attested to the devastating effect napalm was having on them.

The 22nd was a busy day for CVG-2 as aircraft from *Boxer* broke up a column of 1,500 NKPA troops while they were crossing the Han River, killing an estimated 200. Not to be outdone, the deep support group hit a railroad tunnel two miles east of Yongyu by dropping a 500 pounder inside the tunnel—no easy feat under any circumstances, but an even more remarkable achievement considering the heavy ground fire.

Seoul was the scene of bitter fighting as the 25th NKPA Brigade contested every block. Marine Colonel Robert Debs Heintz described what the ground forces were up against: “Every intersection was barricaded after the fashion of the Paris Commune—carts, earth-filled rice bags, poor people’s furniture and rubble.” Some of these barricades were as much as eight feet high and backed up by concealed antitank guns. Target identification from the air was especially difficult amid the tangle of narrow streets, and the buildings interfered with radio communications, which hampered coordination with the air.

The result was a terrible battle as the NKPA desperately struggled to keep open the escape route for their forces in the south. More men were lost liberating Seoul than in the landings at Inchon and the drive inland combined, another painful lesson emphasizing the great equalizer air power had become.

No surer evidence validated Naval Aviation’s

influence than the lower casualty figures when the men on the ground could count on having “angels on their shoulders.” But “low and slow” was seldom without cost, however, as VA-65 learned on 20 September when Lieutenant (jg) Clifford E. Seeman was killed when his AD-4 was shot down by NKPA ground fire near Kaesong.

Fortunately, not all losses resulted in pilot casualties. On 19 September Ens. David F. Tatum of the VF-52 *Sea Lancers* was over Pyongyang when his *Panther* (BuNo 122581) was hit by ground fire, causing a main fuel system failure. He coasted all the way back to the Yellow Sea, ditching alongside HMS *Jamaica*.

Simultaneously with Operation Chromite, the Eighth Army launched its long-awaited offensive to break out of Pusan. Army troops fought their way over 100 miles in just 11 hours to link up with the 7th Division near Suwon early on 27 September, while continual air strikes drove the NKPA retreat into a rout, forcing them to abandon their arms and equipment as they fled. Seoul was declared liberated on the 27th, though fighting continued through the end of the month.

The reestablishment of peace as had been mandated by a 27 June UN Security Council Resolution could not be accomplished until the enemy complied with UN demands to respect South Korea’s freedom. North Korea’s refusal to do so made it necessary to pursue the enemy across the 38th parallel to deny them the opportunity to regroup and be resupplied by the East Bloc.

Aided by overwhelming air power, UN forces crossed the 38th parallel into North Korea on 1 October, advancing rapidly up both coasts. On 10 October the carriers along the east coast were joined by *Leyte* (CV 32) with CVG-3 embarked. She had steamed 18,513 miles from Beirut, Lebanon, via Norfolk, Va., and the

Panama Canal in 35 days at an average speed of 23 knots, demonstrating the flexibility of Naval Aviation.

The advance along the east coast moved so rapidly that the vital port of Wonsan was liberated by Republic of Korea (ROK) troops on 10 October, ahead of schedule. The windfall of the port's seizure made the amphibious assault unnecessary, but poorly developed lateral communications across Korea still forced the transfer of the X Corps from the west coast to the east coast to be made by sea. The 1st Marine Division departed Inchon on 12 October and arrived off the east coast only to discover that under Soviet supervision, the enemy had mined Changjon Kojé, Hungnam, Songjin and Wonsan in the interim.

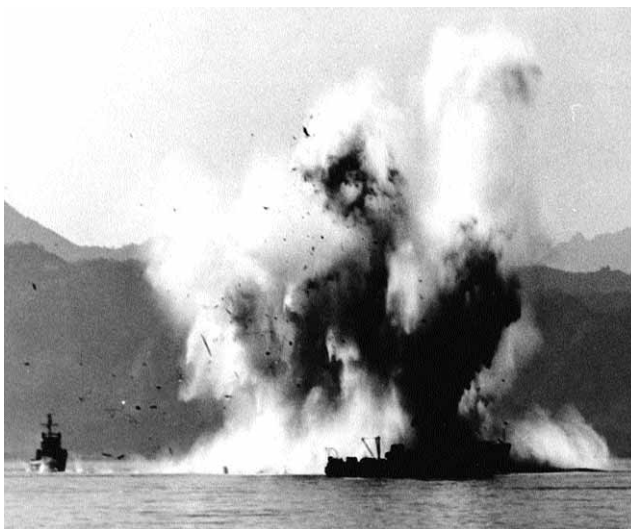
The enemy had packed the area with at least 2,000 mines—one of the densest concentrations of mines ever encountered in naval warfare—many of which were highly sensitive Russian magnetic types that were extremely dangerous to sweep in the shallow coastal waters. In addition, contrary to international law, extensive use was also made of drifting mines. Over 20 UN vessels were assigned the daunting task of reopening the east coast to shipping. Meanwhile, the Marines were forced to postpone their landing for six days while minesweeping operations cleared the area.

Naval Aviation was indispensable to the minesweeping effort. *Rochester* controlled naval air operations in the area, while Marine aircraft from *Badoeng Strait* and *Sicily* provided cover and spotted mines. Both shipboard and shore-based aircraft conducted aerial patrols to monitor coastal junks and fishing vessels as potential minelayers, often passing over enemy-controlled territory and taking ground fire as a result. Due to their ability to hover, helos were of special value in locating and identifying mines, as well as gaps in the mine lines. *Rochester* served as the mother ship for HU-1's Det. 9 as it kept its pair of Sikorsky HO3S-1s continuously aloft assisting minesweeping efforts.

During September and October, *Magpie* (AMS 25), *Pirate* (AM 275), *Pledge* (AM 277) and an Army tug were all sunk by mines, while *Brush* (DD 745) and *Mansfield* (DD 728) were damaged, knocking both destroyers temporarily out of action. Working closely with the U.S., our South Korean allies also lost BM FS 673 and YMS 516 to the insidious menace, while YMS

509 and YNS 504 were also damaged. Without the dedicated support provided by naval and marine aircraft, the losses would have been far worse, and naval operations would have been paralyzed.

On 15 October CVG-2 flew over 100 sorties from *Boxer* over Wonsan, dropping the bridges around the port and plastering the enemy batteries on Sin Do Island. Pilots noted that 20mm guns were adequate against heavier targets such as tanks and ships, but on the deep runs they were making against personnel and lighter buildings and vehicles, 50-caliber guns did the trick. The following day, CVG-2 aircraft went to work on the railroad, tearing up dozens of cars and several locomotives and even hitting a train with HVARs while it was attempting to hide in a tunnel.



**Above, the South Korean minesweeper YMS 516 is blown to pieces by a mine at Wonsan on 18 October 1950. Without Naval Aviation's minesweeping support, naval operations could not have proceeded.**

When the east coast operations ground to a halt, the NKPA mobilized their reserves for a final stand in the hills around their capitol of Pyongyang, ensconcing themselves in well-camouflaged pillboxes and log bunkers that were an aerial recognition nightmare. In addition, the UN advance was also impeded by the enemy's mines and by the X Corps' shipping out, which delayed the unloading of supplies.

Thus, only after repeated air strikes was the UN able to break through into Pyongyang, where another brutal street battle ensued. The North Koreans were

fully aware of the disadvantages which such fighting placed upon the UN forces, but months of being stalked from the air had taken the fight out of them and the city was declared liberated on 19 October, although snipers plagued the area for days afterward.

To illustrate the tremendous buildup of Naval Aviation and its impact on this fighting, during June 1950 Navy and Marine aircraft flew only 15 sorties, but in July that number rose to 229; 3,422 in August; 7,592 in September; 6,441 in October; 6,725 in November; and 6,781 in December. In October, 3,574 of the sorties were launched from CVs, 539 from CVEs/CVLs, 604 from shore-based Navy aircraft and 1,724 from Marine aircraft ashore. Approximately 20 percent of the UN air sorties flown during October were close support, 30 percent interdiction, and the remaining 50 percent comprised reconnaissance, transport and other operational missions. Five aircraft were lost to enemy action, and 20 were lost operationally.

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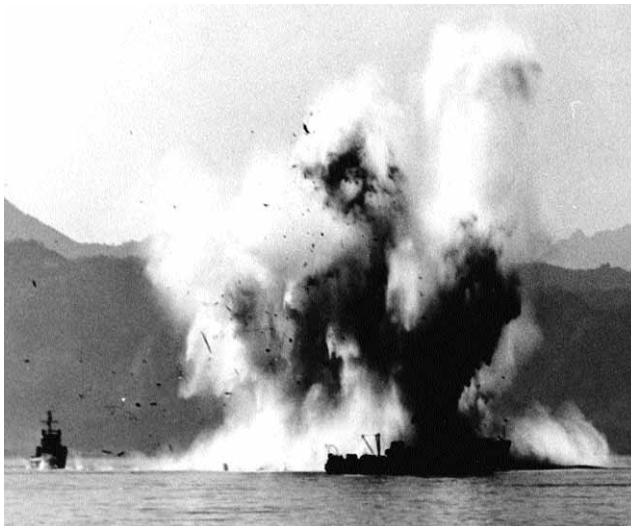
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